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ABSTRACT

Twenty-six public interest research groups (PIRGs) were surveyed on aspects of their organizations. Key findings include: (1) most PIRGs concentrate primarily on public interest issues rather than campus-specific issues; (2) most have four or fewer full-time staff and annual budgets of less than $50,000; (3) most are supported by six or fewer campuses with a mandatory fee at their largest supporting campus; (4) all the PIRGs surveyed felt that other consumer action groups are favorable toward them; (5) many have encountered opposition from special interests; and (6) most see their resources and activities increasing. The Minnesota Public Interest Research Group stands first in the number of campuses from which it collects (16) and second in size of its annual budget and full-time staff. In dollar amounts, the University of Minnesota is the second largest contributing campus to a PIRG, second to Queens College. (Author/MSE)

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A Profile of Public Interest Research Groups

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Abstract

Twenty-six public interest research groups (PIRGs) were surveyed on aspects of their organizations. Key findings include: Most PIRGs concentrate primarily on "public interest" issues rather than "campus-specific" issues. Most have four or fewer full-time staff and annual budgets of less than $50,000. Most are supported by six or fewer campuses with a mandatory fee at their largest supporting campus. All the PIRGs surveyed feel that other consumer action groups are favorable toward them. Many have encountered opposition from "special interests," and most see their resources and activities as increasing. The Minnesota Public Interest Research Group stands first in the number of campuses from which it collects (16) and second in the size of its annual budget ($163,723) and full-time staff (12). In terms of dollar amount, the University of Minnesota is the second largest contributing campus to a public interest research group ($108,664 in 1975-76, second to the $110,000 collected at Queens College).

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A Profile of Public Interest Research Groups

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This study describes aspects of Public Interest Research Groups in the United States and Canada. It was conducted for the Regents of the University of Minnesota to help them compare the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group (MPIRG) with other Public Interest Research Groups.

Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) are research and advocacy agencies controlled and funded by college students for the purpose of representing the interests of students and the general public on environmental, social, and consumer issues. Their activities include the development of research reports, lobbying in state legislatures, and the initiation of lawsuits. The concept of PIRGs was developed by Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate, in the early 1970s as a means of channeling student activism toward social change. Most PIRGs are similar to traditional student organizations such as student government in that they are funded by students but are dissimilar in that they are chartered corporations independent of individual colleges and universities. PIRGs are typically organized with a state board and staff and local chapters at individual colleges.

State and local PIRGs have contracted with individual colleges and universities to have the institution collect money from its students. The collection methods vary with the institution. One funding method is to

allocate part of the student activities fee collected at the university or college to the PIRG. Another is to charge a separate mandatory PIRG fee for all students, allowing for a later refund for students who do not wish to pay it. Two other systems involve a checkoff at registration. Under a positive checkoff system, students do not pay the PIRG fee unless they indicate that they do wish to pay it. With a negative checkoff, students pay the fee unless they indicate they do not wish to pay it. Many of the colleges using a checkoff system also permit students to obtain a refund at a later time.

The activities of PIRGs have created controversy in several states. For example, the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group has taken stands on such highly politicized issues as logging and mining in wilderness areas, the dumping of wastes in Lake Superior, and the ethics of the hearing aid industry. Critics have charged that colleges and universities compromise their neutrality on such issues by collecting PIRG fees. They argue that students should not be charged for activities on issues not directly and obviously connected to colleges and universities. They suggest that PIRGs should seek money only through fund raising drives, as do other social action groups. Other critics are willing to support the concept of a PIRG fee but question the mandatory and negative checkoff fee systems. They suggest that these collection mechanisms are not as voluntary as a positive checkoff, i.e., they capitalize on student apathy by requiring that a student exert an effort not to pay. Critics suggest that a positive checkoff system in which the effort must be exerted to pay the fee is more voluntary and allows a greater freedom of choice than do other systems. In reply, PIRGs have asserted that negative checkoff systems

allow complete freedom of choice and are fairer than the mandatory fees charged for other student activities.

The debate over the present negative checkoff MPIRG fee at the University of Minnesota provides the immediate context for the data presented. To aid in their deliberations, the Regents of the University of Minnesota requested that the Office for Student Affairs gather descriptive information about other PIRGs. The survey focused on statewide (not local chapters) and asked the following questions:

How old are they?

From how many campuses does the PIRG collect money?

How much money did the PIRG collect in the 1975-76 academic year?

Which is the campus making the largest contribution to the PIRG?

How much money was collected at this campus during 1975-76?

What type of fee collection system is used on this campus?

How much is the fee on this campus?

How many full-time employees and part-time employees and volunteers did the PIRG have in 1975-76?

What is the PIRG director's opinion as to whether the resources and activities of the PIRG are generally increasing, decreasing, or staying the same?

Does the PIRG concentrate on public interest issues, primarily on exclusively student issues such as tuition and housing, or does it concentrate on both types of issues about equally?

How have consumer groups in the state viewed the PIRG's projects?

How have special interest groups in the state viewed the PIRG's projects?

What were the PIRG's major projects in 1975-76?

Method

Survey questions were developed by the University of Minnesota Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs in consultation with the secretary of the Board of Regents. Questions were checked and modified as necessary by the Office of Student Life Studies and Planning, a research arm of the Office for Student Affairs. Modifications were not made in the substance of the questions, but only in terms of their readability and technical appropriateness. The Minnesota Public Interest Research Group furnished a list of names and addresses of directors of state PIRGs in the United States and Canada. In December 1976 and January 1977, surveys and follow-up letters were mailed to 33 PIRGs, of whom 26 gave responses.

Results

The following pages present the results of the survey in tabular form, with a description of the findings accompanying the tables.

Table 1

Founding Data of State PIRGs

Age of PIRGs

No. formed in	1971	8
No. formed in	1972	8
No. formed in	1973	1
No. formed in	1974	4
No. formed in	1975	2
No. formed in	1976	3
TOTAL		26

1971

- Minnesota
- Texas
- Oregon
- Indiana
- Michigan
- Missouri
- Illinois
- West Virginia

1972

- Vermont
- South Carolina
- California
- New Jersey
- Massachusetts
- Maryland
- North Carolina
- District of Columbia

1973

- New York

1974

- New Mexico
- Ohio
- Georgia
- Alaska

1975

- Nebraska
- New Hampshire

1976

- Ontario
- Rhode Island
- Washington

The largest number of PIRGs were formed in 1971 and 1972. Eight PIRGs including MPIRG were formed in 1971. Eight more were formed in 1972. From 1973 to 1976, eleven more PIRGs have emerged, 11 in 1973, 4 in 1974, 2 in 1975, and 3 in 1976.

Table 2

Number of Campuses

from which Money Was Collected,

Academic Year 1975-76

Number of Campuses	Frequency
16	1
14	1
13	2
11	1
6	2
5	3
4	1
3	2
2	4
1	7
0	2
Total	26

The number of campuses each PIRG collected money from ranged from 0 to 16. The two PIRGs not collecting money on campuses were Alaska and Washington. Alaska PIRG is not funded through the state higher education system, and Washington just began in 1976 and had not collected any funds yet.

MPIRG collected money from the largest number of campuses. Four other PIRGs collected money from 11 campuses or more (New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon).

Table 3

Amount of Money

Collected from Students in 1975-76

365,608	New York
163,723	MPIRG
158,000	Massachusetts
130,000	Oregon
120,000	Michigan
64,232	New Jersey
58,000	Indiana
47,699	Vermont
35,000	Maryland
31,500	Missouri
28,000	North Carolina
25,000	California
20,000	Texas, District of Columbia
18,500	Ontario
17,000	Ohio
12,500	New Mexico
12,000	Georgia
10,000	Rhode Island
4,000	South Carolina
2,500	Illinois
1,000	New Hampshire
675	Nebraska
0	Washington
not available	Alaska
not available	West Virgina

The New York PIRG receives over twice as much money from students as any other PIRG. MPIRG ranks second in student funding. Eighteen of the twenty-six PIRGs surveyed received $50,000 or less from students.

Table 4

PIRG Funding Mechanism

on Major Supporting Campus

Mechanism	Frequency
Positive Check/off	6
Negative Check/off	5 (U of M included)
Mandatory PIRG fee with refund	8
Part of student activity fee (mandatory - no refund)	7
TOTAL	26

The two types of mandatory PIRG fees outnumber the two check-off systems 15 to 11.

Table 5

Funding Mechanism, Fee Size

and Money Collected at Major PIRG Supporting Campuses

State	Campus	Money Collected in 1975-76	Funding Mechanism	Amount of Fee (Per Student per 9 mo. acad. year)
NY	Queens College	$110,000	Mandatory w/refund	$4.00
MN	Univ. of Minn. - Twin Cities Campus	108,664	Negative check off	3.00
MI	Univ. of Mich.	75,000	Negative check off	3.00
MA	Univ. of Mass. (Amherst)	53,900	Negative check off	4.00
OR	Univ. of Oregon	43,000	Student Activity Fee	N.A.*
VT	Univ. of Vermont	35,274	Negative check off	6.00
MD	Univ. of Maryland (College Park)	34,000	Student Activity Fee	3.00
IN	Univ. of Indiana (Bloomington)	22,000	Positive check off	3.00
NJ	Rutgers	18,900	Mandatory w/refund	3.00
MO	St. Louis Univ.	18,500	Mandatory w/refund	4.00
Ont.	Guelph Univ.	18,500	Mandatory w/refund	6.00
TX	Univ. of Houston	16,000	Positive check off	N.A.*
OH	Oberlin	16,000	Mandatory w/refund	6.00
NC	Duke Univ.	15,000	Mandatory w/refund	3.00
NM	Univ. of New Mex. (Albuquerque)	12,500	Mandatory w/refund	4.00
CA	San Diego State Univ.	10,000	Student Activity Fee	N.A.*
DC	George Washington	9,000	Positive check off	4.00
GA	Berry	7,000	Negative check off	6.00
RI	Univ. of Rhode Island	6,000	Positive check off	5.00
SC	Furman	4,000	Mandatory w/refund	3.00
IL	Southern Ill. Univ.	2,500	Mandatory Student Activity Fee	N.A.*
NH	Dartmouth	1,000	Positive check off	4.00
NE	Univ. of Nebraska (Lincoln)	675	Mandatory Student Activity Fee	N.A.*
WA		0	Positive check off	6.00
AK		0	None	-
WV		N.A.*	Student Activity Fee	N.A.*

The Twin Cities campus of the University of Minnesota is second only to Queens College in the amount of money collected. Of the five campuses generating the most money, three have negative check off systems and two have mandatory fees.

*N.A. = Not Available

Table 6

Sizes of PIRG Staffs

	Full-Time Staff	Part-Time Staff	Volunteer Staff (approximate)
New York	23	20	1000+
Massachusetts	12	12	"hundreds"
MPIRG	12	17*	500+
Oregon	11	7	"hundreds"
California	10	20	500+
Michigan	7	10	"hundreds"
New Jersey	7	0	250
Alaska	4	2	50+
North Carolina	4	1	70
Vermont	4	2	10
District of Columbia	3	2	75
Missouri	3	0	75+
Indiana	2	2	70
Maryland	2	2	300
Ohio	2	3	91
Texas	2	0	50
Georgia	1	0	40
New Mexico	1	0	59
Ontario	1	2	25
Illinois	0	0	25
Nebraska	0	0	12
Rhode Island	0	2	100
South Carolina	0	2	10
Washington	0	0	20
West Virginia	0	4	15
New Hampshire	-	1	12

*Recipients of stipends for specific projects

Three of the PIRGs have no paid staff, and three have only part-time staff. Eighteen have four or fewer full-time paid staff members. New York has nearly twice as many full-time staff members as do the two second-place states, Minnesota and Massachusetts.

Table 7

Response to question:

"Generally speaking, are the resources and activities of your PIRG: increasing, decreasing, staying about the same?"

Resources Increasing

Alaska
California
Illinois
Indiana
Maryland
Michigan
MPIRG
Nebraska
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Carolina
Ohio
Ontario
Rhode Island
South Carolina
West Virginia

Resources Staying the Same

District of Columbia
Georgia
Massachusetts
Missouri
Texas
Vermont

Resources Decreasing

New Hampshire

Other

Oregon (fluctuates)
Washington (not available)

Seventeen of the PIRGs said that their resources and activities are increasing. Sixteen said they are staying the same. One said they are decreasing.

Table 8

Response to question:

"Has your PIRG concentrated its efforts:

primarily on 'student issues' (e.g. tuition, student housing),

primarily on 'public interest' issues (e.g. consumer issues, environment, product safety),

on both types of issues about equally?"

Primarily on Student Issues

None

Primarily on Public Interest Issues

Alaska
California
District of Columbia
Georgia
Indiana
Maryland
Massachusetts
Michigan
MPIRG
Missouri
Nebraska
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New York
North Carolina
Ohio
Ontario
Oregon
South Carolina
Texas
Vermont
West Virginia

Both Orientations about Equally

Illinois
New Mexico
Rhode Island

Response Not Available

Washington

None of the PIRGs said that they concentrated primarily on student issues. Three said that they concentrated on both types of issues about equally, while the remainder reported being primarily concerned with public interest issues.

Table 9

Response to question:

"Have 'special interest' groups in your state opposed your PIRG projects?"

Yes

Alaska
Indiana
Maryland (only opposed bills lobbied for)
Michigan
MPIRG (in conceptual sense of MPIRG's existence)
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Carolina
Rhode Island
West Virginia (coal and utilities mainly, CAG, AMA, pharmacists, funeral home directors)
District of Columbia (utility lobbies, bankers' lobbies)
Massachsetts
Missouri (on occasion)
Oregon
Texas

No

California (not directly)
Illinois (not publicly)
Nebraska
Ohio
Ontario (not yet)
South Carolina
Georgia
Vermont (not to great extent)
New Hampshire (not yet)
Washington (too new)

Sixteen of the PIRGs said that they had encountered opposition from special interest groups, while the other ten said that they had not.

Table 10

Response to question:

"How have consumer groups in your state viewed your PIRG's projects?"

All responding PIRGs said that consumer groups viewed their projects favorably.

Conclusions

The results of the survey indicate that most public interest research groups concentrate their efforts primarily on "public interest" issues as opposed to exclusively student issues, have budgets of $50,000 or less annually, have full-time staff members of four or fewer, and collect money from six or fewer campuses. Funding systems at the major supporting campuses for PIRGs are most often a variation of a mandatory fee, either a separate refundable fee or part of a student activities fee. Most PIRGs see their resources and activities as generally increasing, and many have encountered opposition to their projects from "special interest" groups. All say that consumer groups in their states are favorable toward their projects.

The Minnesota Public Interest Research Group stands high on the indicators included in the survey. It collects from the most campuses, it has the second largest budget and the second largest paid staff. The main funding source of MPIRG, the University of Minnesota, is the second largest contributor to a public interest research group anywhere in the country.

Caution should be exercised in the interpretations of the findings of this survey. The survey was not designed to address many of the most difficult and controversial issues regarding PIRGs. It was designed not to assess PIRGs but to describe them. For instance, one cannot make clear inferences about student support for PIRGs from the data. The size of contributing campuses, the percentage of students contributing on these campuses, and the reputation of the PIRGs on these campuses are not considered, even though these are all variables relevant to student support. Likewise, one cannot make predictions about an individual PIRG's budget

size under a different system. For example, one cannot safely predict that a change from a negative to a positive checkoff system at the University of Minnesota would reduce the size of the campus's contribution to MPIRG from the present $108,000 to the $21,000 the Indiana PIRG obtains from students at the University of Indiana. Similarly, the data are neutral with respect to the philosophical issues of whether one funding mechanism is more equitable than another or whether a public university should collect money for advocacy activities.